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WINNING THE PEACE:

SADAT AND THE YOM KIPPUR WAR, OCTOBER 1973

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The October 1973 Arab-Israeli War, almost wholly
designed and initiated by Egypt's President Anwar Sadat,
might be viewed by some as simply another of the military
and civil unrest convulsions that have periodically plagued
the Middle East from 1947 to the present. However, a more
thoughtful analysis shows it to be a much more unique
occurrence in modern Arab-Israeli conflict and relations.
A closer look also shows the Yom Kippur War to be a clear
example where, not only for the retrospective analyst but
also for the contemporaneous strategist, many different
elements of an overall, coordinated national security
strategy may be identified and assessed. This paper will
explain what Egypt's national security inputs were, how
Anwar Sadat designed his statecraft to achieve his
objectives, and how, despite historical assertions to the
contrary, Anwar Sadat "won" his overall peace or goals as
planned even after his nominal military defeat.

What were the most important of the unique
characteristics of this war? First, it was the brainchild
of almost one man alone – Sadat. Second, it flowed from a
conceptualization by Sadat of how Egypt could achieve its
national security goals not only through political and
diplomatic means but also through a coordinated,
successful, surprise military offensive – but with the

strategic caveat that at the cessation of fighting it should not totally matter whether the military action alone succeeded or failed. Third, the October 1973 War was not only fought physically and psychologically within the sandy arena of the Middle East but also on the worldwide stage of the Cold War and superpower confrontation. Last, the psychological perception of who won the War was as important as any standard measure of short-term military success. Below, we explain the situation Sadat faced, analyze the key political, diplomatic and military factors of his Yom Kippur strategy, AND establish that Sadat and Egypt achieved their national security objectives while withstanding a nominal military defeat and while seemingly surrendering to superpower actions to stymie Egypt and its Arab allies.

And what were Sadat's national security objectives – the tangible and intangible goals that Sadat sought for his country? They were, first and foremost, to maintain the present physical integrity of Egypt while regaining most or all of the Sinai and Gaza Strip territory lost in 1967. However, just as important, the objectives were also to improve Egypt's precarious economic situation, to restore the honor and morale of the Egyptian people, to reassert Egypt's leadership in the Arab world and to maintain the

Arab and Non-Aligned Movement's stance against Israel.

Finally, equally crucial was the need and the desire to move Egypt's international image away from that of a Soviet near-vassal state and towards one of international independence, such that world economic and political powers who could no longer take Egypt's position for granted would need to devote much more effort and inducements to their relationships.

In 1972-73 Anwar Sadat found himself in a very precarious environment where he personally, as president, and where Egypt as a country had to fulfill an enormous burden of projecting leadership in difficult domestic, pan-Arab and international contexts. In the wake of the Six-Day War, the Arab world, "surveying the political and military wreckage … found their armies broken and defeated and over one million brethren … under Israeli occupation. Besides the territorial and population losses, the Arabs had suffered a profound psychological setback in that they felt they had been humiliated and dishonored."[1] Thus, intertwined reasons and determinants informed the problems Sadat faced at each level. To analyze the factors that compelled Sadat to prosecute the October 1973 war to

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[1] Bard O'Neil, "The October War: A Political-Military Assessment," *Air University Review,* 25, (July-August 1974): p 28.

achieve his political, diplomatic and strategic objectives, his domestic environment must also be described.

First, Egypt was the most populous country in the Middle East, with a quickly growing population that had also received its share of Palestinian refugees. Egypt spent more than it earned or produced, and millions that should have gone to food, education and infrastructure went to defense. Egyptians felt this domestic physical discomfort, and the psychological discomfort of continuing to be perceived, in light of the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, as a defeated Arab leader-state, despite Sadat's repeated claims that previous defeats would soon be avenged.   The status quo of "no peace, no war" [2] was an enormous burden.

Second, Sadat had inherited Egypt's position as the political leader of the Arab world, and fought hard to maintain it. Internally, Sadat had turned back several leadership challenges, including coup attempts. Regionally, Nasser had led the Arab world at the 1967 Arab League summit in Khartoum in forging an outwardly implacable united diplomatic and military front against Israel after the Six-Day War. While the Arab world's desire for revenge never wavered, their internal rivalries

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[2] The Insight Team of the London *Sunday Times*, "Sadat Decides on War," Chapter 3 in The Yom Kippur War (New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc. 1974) p 47.

could always threaten Sadat's Arab leadership. The
Palestinian groups, and particularly their turn to
terrorism as dramatized by the 1972 Munich Olympic attack,
also threatened Sadat and Egypt's regional leadership.

Finally, on the wider international front, Sadat was
increasingly stymied. His frustrations with the Soviet
Union's broken economic and military promises led to his
decision to expel most Soviet advisors in July 1972. His
relationship with the United States, in his mind, was
almost nonexistent. The entire history of U.S. involvement
in the Middle East since the declaration of Israeli
statehood in 1947 was to support Israel (with the crucial
distinction of always maintaining an adequate flow of oil
from Israel's Arab adversaries). In just one year, 1972,
the U.S. had sold Israel some six hundred million dollars
worth of weapons.[3] Sadat had no reason to expect any change
in U.S. attitude without a dramatic change in
circumstances. Sadat had also been key in forging
Organization of African Unity and Non-Aligned Nations
Movement positions against Zionism/Israel, and needed to
demonstrate leadership to maintain diplomatic and economic
support for Egypt in those organizations.

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[3] Ibid, p 54.

Few situations or dynamics can ever be seen in isolation, and the most important counterpoint here to Egypt's situation was Israel's. In 1973, where did Israel stand, and what did it want? Israel had won every important Arab-Israeli confrontation it fought alone (thereby excluding the Suez War, where is was aligned with a Britain and France who did not understand the U.S. interests in the region), including its 1947 struggle for statehood and the 1967 Six-Day War, which left it occupying Arab territory on all sides. Israel's leadership was intent on maintaining these favorable strategic territorial changes, and made it clear from 1967 to 1973 that "a return to the status quo antebellum would not be acceptable."[4] Significant new Israeli settlements were being established in the West Bank, Golan Heights, and as far a field as Sharm al-Sheikh, a key strategic point for Egypt. Israel's actual military prowess, and military superiority as perceived by most of the world, was almost a given. Third party diplomatic efforts since 1967 had shown that Israel was just as intractable as its Arab adversaries when it came to anything more than minute atmospheric concessions towards peace. Israel was also secure in its relationship with the United States, due to geo-strategic and Cold War

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[4] O'Neil, p 29.

considerations, the emotional identification of many Americans with the state that symbolized survival after the Holocaust, and the incredibly strong bonds between Israel and the American Jewish community.

In the run-up to war, where did Sadat stand vis-à-vis the rest of the world using diplomacy as a tool of statecraft? Was diplomacy a means, in the current environment, which would help him achieve his goals? In the wake of the 1967 war, Sadat had been patient with world, and especially American, diplomatic efforts, but eventually had to conclude that outside diplomacy would not solve his problems. He said "I did have slight hopes of Secretary of State Rodgers in 1970 and 1971. And he came shopping here. But all he did was to extract more and more concessions from us and not a single one from the Israelis."[5] Sadat then analyzed the problem further, and realized why this was happening. "Rogers thought we would never fight. The Israelis thought they could not be surprised. The West thought we were poor soldiers without good generals."[6] He also believed that "the stalemate – no peace, no war – suited the superpowers. There was some agreement between them about the level of arms supplies."[7]

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[5] *SundayTimes,* p 46.
[6] Ibid, p 46.
[7] Ibid, p 52.

This was especially true after the Nixon-Breshnev summit of May 1972.

Sadat then turned in 1972-73 to putting diplomacy to work as his own tool, as another preparation for war and his intended strategic outcome. He strengthened further his relationships with his Arab brothers. He repaired somewhat the relationship with Jordan, with whom both he and Syria had broken in 1971 over King Hussein's offer of a Jordanian state that included a Palestinian component. He shored up his support among his oil-rich supporters, primarily Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States. And he brought President Assad of Syria on board as a full co-conspirator, coordinating all action with him. He increased his outreach to the OAU and Non-Aligned States, to the point where President Tito of Yugoslavia sent supplies of weaponry to Egypt once war broke out.

Finally, in October 1973 came the conventional centerpiece of any attempt to change the status quo among nations, and to capture or recapture territory: Sadat's brilliant military offensive. In analyzing this major but short-lived element of his national security strategy, one must conclude that Anwar Sadat's military objectives were well defined, extremely well coordinated with fellow Arab nations, and committed to retaking Arab territory. Again,

this was part of Sadat's grand strategy to manipulate his role on the international stage with a real or perceived military success. "Although the Arab coalition (Syria and Egypt) needed to redeem their honor, the long-term goal of regaining the occupied areas was undoubtedly the key motivation".[8] The coalition's military strategy emphasized retaking and holding part of the Sinai and Golan Heights, inflicting heavy human and material losses on Israel, and heightening superpower interest regarding stability in the region.

Militarily, the Egyptians had improved their capabilities and training since the 1967 debacle. Since that defeat they had been preparing for war and had upped their training intensity. They were also equipped with modern Soviet armaments (even though the Soviets, seemingly under the guise of superpower détente, dragged their heels on sending some state-of-the-art equipment), which was a necessity to match the Israel-United States partnership. This preparation paid dividends during the first several days of the Yom Kippur War, after the Egyptians had sprung their surprise offensive. They achieved notable success as they took advantage of Israel's lack of preparedness and made maximum use of their own improved military

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[8] O'Neil, p 32.

capabilities. "The Arab armies made effective use of their integrated air defense systems (anti-aircraft artillery and surface-to-air missiles) and anti-tank missiles". [9] Sadat also had the foresight to concern himself with important military-related elements on the domestic front. For instance, he wanted to ensure each factory and power station had alternative plans for operation during the war since they were part of the battlefield.

This initial battlefield success is even more notable when considering Egypt's recent past. For instance, when Sadat first spoke to his War Minister, Sadek, and his field commanders in October 1972, they all felt the Egyptian Army was very vulnerable. War Minister Sadek did not want to fight because he was afraid of an actual battle taking place, in contrast to the current standoff across the Suez Canal. In another example, the Egyptian Third Army commander told Sadat that his unit was completely exposed to any potential Israeli attack. His concern was Israeli construction of a huge chain of fortifications, approximately 47 feet high, on the Suez Canal's eastern side. On their side, the Egyptian's fortifications were only ten feet high. There was also concern with the Israelis' network of electronic equipment, which could

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[9] O'Neil, p 33.

serve as an effective early warning system. Faced with this situation, and the less-than-confident attitudes of his commanders, Sadat stepped forward, rallied his side, and made an intensive strategic study of his adversary. Remember, Sadat believed that U.S. Secretary of State Rogers, along with most of the world thought the Egyptians would never fight, that they were poor soldiers without good leaders, and that the Israelis thought they could not be surprised. Additionally, Sadat believed that the current projection of Egypt's military capabilities was not an effective diplomatic weapon as long as the Israelis' entrenched memory was their 1967 military success. Although these attitudes infuriated Sadat, he managed to take advantage of these Israeli perceptions and overconfidence and used them as a means towards his ends.

Sadat also demonstrated uncommon savvy in his dealings with the Soviets. Sadat had believed in giving the Egyptian-Soviet military partnership a chance, but realized in preparing for war that he had to worry as much about the commitment of his Soviet ally as well as his Israeli adversary. The history was that "The Soviets tried to undermine Sadat even before he was established, and when that failed the Soviets supported an attempted coup that

Sadat thwarted only at the last minute".[10] From the
beginning, the Soviets had preferred others to Sadat as
Nasser's successor. Sadat knew he needed Soviet support,
but also realized that he could not fully trust or overly
rely upon them. By being aware of Soviet worldwide
objectives, he was able to maintain their support in the
Middle East, but knew it did not extend to a commitment
that could spark a superpower confrontation. He also was
very aware that the Soviet Union was critically important
as the only potential supplier of arms, and that they
possessed leverage in dealing with the United States.
Therefore, to sure up the relationship he signed a fifteen-
year friendship treaty on May 1971 to reassure the Soviets'
and to solidify their commitment to Egypt.

    However, Sadat eventually became very frustrated with
the Soviets, based upon the Soviets strong feelings against
Egyptian military action. The Soviets did not want to risk
a superpower confrontation. Thus, the Soviets tried to
pacify Sadat by providing him primarily defensive weapons.
Sadat's frustration with the Soviets came to a head when
they would not provide the arms that had been agreed upon
between both parties. He ordered the departure of all
Soviet military experts (15,000) from Egypt within ten

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[10] *Sunday Times,* p 48.

days. On July 15, 1972 the Soviet exodus began. After the 1973 war, Sadat stated, "I expelled them to give myself completely freedom of maneuver".[11] Sadat's strategy in expelling the Soviets worked because after sending his National Security Advisor and War Minister on two visits to Moscow, the Soviets finally agreed to send offensive weapons to Egypt. Additionally, they agreed to train the Egyptians on the use of the new missiles. This is yet another good example of Sadat's ability to manipulate a relationship to his advantage, using a combination of diplomatic and military instruments to work towards his objectives.

Sadat knew he needed a brilliant planner to assist him in executing his strategic concept – someone whose philosophy matched his own and who would obey orders. So he appointed a new War Minister, General Ismail, who later became Commander-in-Chief of the Armies. General Ismail rapidly began his cautious, methodical and ingenious war planning. "He swiftly decided that a repeat of the 1969-70 War of Attrition would be disastrous".[12] General Ismail agreed with his chief of staff's tactics, labeled the "meat grinder" approach. He felt the planned strike should be

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[11] *SundayTimes*, p 58.
[12] *Sunday Times,* p 60.

dealt jointly from two operational fronts, one being the north for Syria and the other being the south for Egypt. On November 30, 1972, he called Sadat to inform him that the defensive plan was complete and he was about to begin developing the offensive plan. "The basic outline of the offensive plan was completed by January 1973".[13] In developing the offensive plan, General Ismail asked every officer to climb the Egyptian fortifications, which were now 65 feet high, and decisively plan their action after they crossed the Canal. This brilliant means of empowerment enabled the officers to build their self-confidence, participate in devising the plan and share ownership of the operation.

The offensive plan Egypt decided upon began with a carefully planned surprise assault across the Suez Canal, capturing the Bar Lev Line and establishing five East Bank bridgeheads, each of ten to fifteen kilometers deep. Based upon their risk assessment, the Egyptians rapidly dismissed the option of a deep offensive beyond Arab defensive air cover. The Egyptians did a superb job of assessing the advantages and disadvantages of both themselves and the Israelis. The Egyptians knew the Israelis had the advantage of possessing air superiority and they also knew

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[13] Anwar Sadat, In Search of Identity, (New York: Harper & Row, 1978) p 237.

the United States would provide Israel immediate aid as
necessary. In terms of Israeli disadvantages, the
Egyptians determined that the Israelis had long, extended
lines of communications which would be tough to maintain in
a prolonged war. The Egyptians also felt another Israeli
disadvantage was that the Israelis would not be able to
sustain high manpower losses, both in terms of personnel
replacements and national will. Perhaps the most important
Egyptian advantage was their analysis that the Israelis'
overconfidence, bordering on conceit, would work to the
Arab advantage. The Egyptians felt their advantages
included a more just cause, international opinion, Arab
unity, tough combat infantrymen, and an airtight air
defense umbrella. [14]

 Sadat's General Command planned several key elements
that were instrumental to the surprise attacks success.
These elements included "a thorough analysis of the Israeli
theory of security; a study of the topographical and
meteorological circumstances of the oncoming battle; a
study of the psychological temperament of the Israeli
Military Command; the assembly of the most minute detail of
the enemy together with a study of the defense system of

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[14] Hassan El Badri, Taha El Magdoub and Mohammed Dia El Din Zohdy, "Decision and Concept," in The Ramadan War 1973, p 19.

the Suez Canal; the selection of the best method of
preparing and organizing the Egyptian armed forces and full
concentration on means".[15] Sadat's decision to select
October 6 was ingenious. It was a Jewish holiday, with
both the Israeli government and military not working.
Sadat knew the selection of October 6 would drastically
impede the Israeli military process of mobilizing its much
needed reserve forces, slow even on an average day. He had
already caused the Israelis to mobilize twice before,
resulting in false alarms and significant costs. In fact,
when Israel was asked after the war why they did not
mobilize their forces in early October at the first sign of
trouble, they cited the previous two mistakes.

"Sadat's decision to use force was taken as part of a
direct and total strategy, in which armed forces were to
play the principal role, with the aim of changing the
existing political and military balance in the Middle East
by undermining the basic concepts of the Israeli national
security doctrine".[16] President Sadat's military strategy
was indeed successful because it achieved his goals. The
outcome of the conflict was a territorial gain for Egypt by
holding their reclaimed east bank positions. After the

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[15] Ibid, p 18.
[16] Ibid, p 17.

war, despite the near encirclement of the Egyptian Armies by Israeli forces, the Egyptians felt they could afford to negotiate with the Israelis because they had redeemed their honor and challenged the Israeli national security. Anwar Sadat's military objectives were well defined, extremely well coordinated with fellow Arab nations and committed to retaking Arab territory, all while upholding and defending Arab character. While both the United States and the Soviet Union may have perceived initially that Egypt had lost the war, in retrospect Egypt may have lost a military battle but definitely won the strategic "war."

Anwar Sadat clearly achieved Egypt's national security objectives in 1973 through the adept and far-sighted use of diplomatic and military statecraft. He reestablished a military presence in the Sinai. He proved that the Israeli military was not invincible, and could be physically threatened by the Arab world. He raised the morale of millions of Egyptians and their Arab brothers, and lifted much of the psychological gloom that had settled on the Arabs in relation to Israel. And, most importantly, he thrust Egypt back on to the world stage, and through this reestablished prominence gained his country a considerable voice in Middle East and, by extension, world affairs, in the Cold War equation. This new prominence not only gained

Egypt significant new political and diplomatic resources, but also a new infusion of economic resources from the Arab world, the United States, and other Western countries.

In retrospect, Sadat was a brilliant multi-dimensional chess player, able to conceive of and implement bold diplomatic, political and military strategies to achieve his national security objectives. Sadat himself was sure of his overall victory, writing later that he gave a speech on October 16, "when the war was ten days old and my victory was a fact that stunned the whole world. "[17] He further summed-up the national security outcome of the war in his autobiography, by the sense of satisfaction and success evident in his words. He wrote "With this admirable first strike, the Egyptian Air Force recovered all it had lost in the 1956 War and the 1967 defeat, and paved the way for our armed forces subsequently to achieve that victory which restored the self-confidence of our armed forces, our people, and our Arab nation. It also restored the world's confidence in us, and exploded forever the myth of an invincible Israel."[18]

Henry Kissinger agreed in his memoirs, writing "The Syrian and Egyptian armies both suffered heavy setbacks.

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[17] *Sunday Times*, p 58.
[18] *Sunday Times,* p 60.

Yet Sadat achieved his fundamental objective of shaking belief in Israel's invincibility and Arab impotence, and thus transformed the psychological basis of the negotiating stalemate. His purpose, in short, was psychological and diplomatic, much more than military."[19] In statecraft theory, knowingly or unknowingly, Sadat had also fulfilled one of Carl Von Clausewitz' key dictums – "the political object is the goal, war is the means of reaching it, and means can never be considered in isolation from their purpose."[20] For all these reasons, Sadat's execution of the Yom Kippur War was an outstanding example of the use of diplomatic, political and military statecraft to achieve the goals of a national security strategy.

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[19] Henry Kissinger, "Why We Were Surprised," <u>Years of Upheaval</u> (Boston: Little, Brown, Inc. 1982), p 460.
[20] Carl Von Clausewitz, <u>On War</u>, (Princeton University Press, 1976), p 87.